PIPPA'S PONY TALES

Team Work



PIPPA FUNNELL

OLYMPIC MEDALLIST

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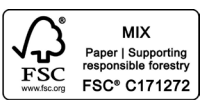
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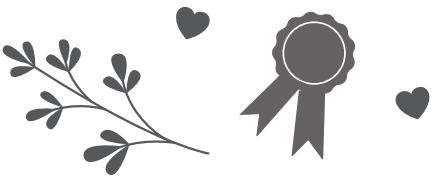
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Chapter One

The sun was setting over the tree tops behind the barn at Hancocks Event Yard. Specks of hay dust swirled in the dusky light. As Tilly made her final round of checks, making sure every horse was clean, fed and comfortable, she smiled to herself. She couldn't believe she'd spent most of the holidays working for top international event rider, Livvy James.

Tilly had managed to impress Livvy during a British Junior Squad training week, which had been held at Hancocks. In turn, Livvy

had asked Tilly to help in the yard over the holidays.

Luckily, Livvy and Angela, Silver Shoe Farm's owner, were old friends, so Angela had agreed, even though she was losing one of her star stable hands for a week. And even though Tilly was busy at Hancocks, she still visited Silver Shoe every day. She'd learned to ride there and it had also become the home of her very special horse, Magic Spirit.

Magic needed his daily exercise, not to mention feeding, grooming and mucking out.

Everyone at Silver Shoe knew these tasks were best left to Tilly, as Magic could frequently be a real handful, but never when Tilly was looking after him. Their bond was special.

It was hard work, committing time to two yards, but the crazy long hours – up at five in the morning, home at seven in the evening

– were worth it. Tilly was getting to learn the ropes in one of the busiest event yards in the country while still being there for her favourite horse.

Today was even busier than usual. In addition to her duties at the yards, she was having an evening out. Anna, her Junior Squad team mate and bass guitar fanatic, was playing with her band at the local rugby club. Tilly couldn't wait to hear Anna's music, but more importantly, she couldn't wait to see another of her team mates, Harry Grey, who was also going to be there. Aside from being an excellent rider, Harry just happened to be gorgeous, funny and kind.

Tilly brushed the hay out of her hair, checked her watch and walked across the yard. She had less than an hour to exercise Magic, before she had to hurry home, shower, choose an outfit, put some make-up on (something she rarely did), and get to the rugby club

in time for the opening song. She searched for her phone. It wasn't in her breeches or the front pocket of her hoody. Suddenly, she noticed Livvy James striding towards her with the phone in her hand.

'Looking for this?'

'Oh, yes,' said Tilly, remembering that she'd been texting her great friend, Mia, during her break. 'Thanks. I was starting to panic. I need to call my dad for a lift.'

'Are you going to Silver Shoe?'

Tilly nodded.

'I'll take you,' said Livvy. 'I'm heading that way anyway. And *actually* there's something I want to discuss with you.'

'Oh,' said Tilly, intrigued. 'Okay, thanks.'

It wasn't until they were in the car – a magnificent 4x4, a prize from one of Livvy's many event wins – that Livvy started to explain.

'I know you're incredibly busy, Tilly,' she said.

'And that you'll have to go back to normal Silver Shoe hours once school starts again in September, but there is one more favour I'd like to ask you.'

Tilly looked up. She'd do anything for Livvy. Having one of her all-time event heroines take an interest in her riding career was a dream come true.

'I'm taking Seasonal Jester to Germany next week. It's the five star in Luhmühlen, one of my favourite competitions.'

Tilly nodded. She knew Seasonal Jester. She'd tacked him up a few times and had watched Livvy training him in the massive sand school. He was a fine chestnut thoroughbred with extravagant paces and plenty of jumping ability, but very sensitive.

'Andrew, my usual groom, has to fly back to Ireland for a funeral,' Livvy went on. 'I need a replacement. Someone who's reliable, someone who's passionate, someone who'll

do the very best job they can...'

Tilly guessed what Livvy was going to say next. Her stomach fluttered with butterflies.

'Would you be able to step in, Tilly? All expenses paid. You'd have to sleep in the horsebox, but there's plenty of room. It's a great competition and you'll learn a lot. Only thing is, you'll need a passport.'

'I've got a passport,' said Tilly, stumbling to get the words out quickly enough.

'So, that's a yes?'

'Triple yes!'

'Excellent. I had a few other people in mind, but you're who I wanted most. I think you're ready for some experience on the international circuit. Although, before we get carried away, we'd better check with your parents.'

'They'll say yes,' said Tilly confidently, already calling home.

She knew her mum and dad would be

delighted by the opportunity. They, of all people, understood exactly what it would mean to her.

Twenty minutes later, having got the yes she wanted, Tilly was in the yard at Silver Shoe, tacking up Magic. She made sure his noseband was sitting comfortably and gave him a pat.

'Luhmühlen, Magic! Can you *believe* it? *Luhmühlen*! I'm going to groom for Livvy James!'

Magic gave a nicker and swiped the early evening gnats with his tail.

'Only thing is,' Tilly continued, her voice dropping to a whisper. 'It'll mean leaving you.'

Suddenly, a knot of stress replaced the happy flutter. Magic responded by prodding Tilly's cheek with his nose, bothering her for a cuddle. She ran her hands across his silky coat and snuggled into him. Leaving Magic for any length of time was always difficult. She'd had

to do it before, for holidays and school trips, and she'd missed him terribly. But now, now there was another reason why leaving was going to be hard.

Tilly and Magic had been close ever since Tilly had helped rescue him from a busy roadside. Their bond had been instant and it had grown and grown, but the fact remained, Magic was an abandoned horse that had been rescued. He wasn't officially Tilly's. Recently, a man called Fred Webb had started emailing her. He'd read about Magic's eventing success in the local papers and was now claiming to be Magic's rightful owner – and he wasn't being particularly friendly about it.

As Tilly walked Magic out of the yard, the thought of Fred Webb's claims made her feel sick with anxiety. She wished he'd just go away. She hadn't replied to any of his emails and she hadn't talked to her parents or Angela about them. Somehow, talking out

loud would make them seem even more real and she wasn't ready for that. She was scared her mum and dad might say it was the law and that she'd be forced to give Magic up. The only person she had confided in was her half-brother, Brook, and they'd both agreed to keep quiet, in the hope that the problem would simply disappear. Either way, the idea of leaving Magic alone for any time at all was worrying. What if Fred Webb sneaked into Silver Shoe and took him?

Brook would help though, Tilly thought. He'd be able to keep an eye on things.

Tilly cantered Magic across the field, allowing him to have a playful buck as he lengthened his stride, then headed for one of her favourite paths back to Silver Shoe. As she turned through the gate, she glanced at her watch. Nearly seven. She'd been enjoying the ride so much, time had flown. Now she was running late! She got back to the yard as

quickly as she could, removed Magic's tack, offered him some water and gave him his feed, settled him for the night, then called her dad for a lift.

When she was finally home, Tilly did her best to forget her worries about Fred Webb and focused on getting ready for her night out. After lots of deliberation, she chose a pair of jeans, neon flip-flops, a short-sleeved shirt, and her horseshoe pendant. She took her hair out of its plaits, ruffled the waves, practised her kissing face in the mirror, then added a slick of lip-gloss. She took one last look and hardly recognised herself, but she thought she looked okay. As she said goodbye to her parents and made for the front door, her younger brother, Adam, raised his eyebrows.

'Who are you trying to impress?'

'None of your business,' she retorted.

He just laughed, as if he knew better.

On the corner of her road, Tilly met her team mates, Ben and Kya.

'Hi,' she said. 'Thanks for waiting for me.'

'No probs,' said Ben. 'We're honoured you've managed to join us. We know you've been a busy bee. How's it going at Livvy's?'

Tilly grinned. She had so much to tell him, especially about her latest invitation to groom at Luhmühlen. Before she'd had the chance to speak, Kya shot her an envious glare.

'Obviously you're not the only one who's been busy,' she said. 'I've been competing Bastion all over the country. In fact, it's been our most successful month yet. We've won rosettes every time out.'

Despite being team mates, Tilly and Kya didn't get on. They were polite most of the time, for the sake of everyone else in the Junior Squad, but under the surface, their rivalry bubbled. Kya had made mean comments about Magic being 'stolen' and

she seemed determined to turn everything between them into a competition, from the pedigree of their horses, to their riding skills, to boys.

Not surprisingly, this evening, Kya was perfectly made-up and wearing a glitzy sequined top and gorgeous designer jeans. She flicked her ice-blonde hair, looked Tilly up and down, then gave a sneery sort of smile.

'Nice to see you wearing something *other* than those dreary beige breeches,' she said.

It was obvious she was referring to Tilly's lucky pair, which – *okay* – she did wear rather a lot (because they were so comfortable to ride in). But why did Kya have to make a point about it?

'I *like* those breeches,' she replied, determined not to get annoyed by Kya's cattiness. 'They're in the wash. I need them for next Monday.'

'What's happening on Monday exactly?'

asked Ben, curious to hear more.

'Um...' said Tilly hesitantly, not really wanting to give away her exciting news in front of Kya. 'Livvy's asked me to groom at Luhmühlen for her. Her usual groom had to drop out.'

Kya fell silent.

'Wow!' said Ben. 'Tilly, that's brilliant!'

Kya frowned.

'Must have been desperate,' she whispered, just loud enough for Tilly to hear.

As they approached the rugby club, they could hear Anna's band doing their sound check. They walked in, bought their tickets, and found a place to stand near the stage. Anna saw them and waved.

'How cool does *she* look!' said Tilly, waving back.

'Too cool for school,' said a familiar voice behind her.

It was Harry Grey.

'Oh, hi!'

'Hey, you look nice.'

'Thanks,' said Tilly, blushing.

The amps were so loud that, in order to be heard, Harry had to stand extra close. As he leaned in, Tilly could feel herself going redder and redder.

'I bet there aren't that many riders who have blue Mohawks and play bass guitar!' he shouted. 'Do you want a drink? I'm buying.'

'Um, sure,' said Tilly. 'I'll have a coke. I need the caffeine to keep me awake!'

'Let's go to the bar. By the way, I was wondering... do you fancy going out for a ride with me? I wondered about next Monday?'

Tilly blinked.

'Hacking?'

'Yeah, hacking. You know, that thing we seem to spend our whole lives doing.'

'Just you and me?'

'And Magic. And Hunter. Otherwise it would be more of a walk than a hack!'

Tilly laughed.

'I see what you mean,' she said, beaming. 'I'd really like to but… I'm afraid I'll be getting ready to go to Germany.'

'Germany?'

'I'm grooming for Livvy at Luhmühlen.'

'*Nice*! Oh well, maybe another time?'

'Yeah. Sure. Another time.'

As the music started, Tilly tensed. How unfair was *that*? Why did two majorly good things have to clash? Her only hope was that Harry would still be interested enough to ask her out again, after her trip.

